

Understanding Secularism Swami Dayananda Saraswati

The aspiration of those who, through a Constitutional amendment, have called India a secular nation, is a noble one. Secularism, as it was originally conceived, embodies basic principles that implement and nurture universal values. Thereby, it fosters a state that is harmonious and, in harmony with the Lord. However one may understand this Lord, one knows, or is taught, that the Lord and ethical behavior are inextricable. The essence of such behavior is captured in a single guideline that is found in all religions—the ethic of reciprocity, popularly known as the golden rule. Do to others as you would want them to do to you. This has been a guiding maxim throughout human history, traceable to ancient religious traditions all over the world. Why is it so pervasive? It is based on a special human endowment, empathy, the capacity to sense the pain of another being and act appropriately. And the extent to which this empathy is honed is a mark of one's evolution as a human being, as one who is in harmony with the Lord.

This principle of reciprocity based on empathy is embedded in a key component of a secular state—all citizens are equal, including equal before the law. Nothing helps to bring about the stability, growth and unity of a nation more than the implementation of this single idea. It instills in each and every individual a basic sense of security and confidence that there is order, there is justice in this world. You can go ahead; the laws will protect you and guide you. This is no less true at the national level. Equality before the law is a potent corrective to corruption, and positions a nation to assert itself effectively in the world.

Equality is also extended, explicitly, to religion. Each individual in a secular state is granted freedom to practice his or her religion. Though this has been made a Constitutional right in India, it was originally part of the fabric of this country. The proximity of religious structures of different traditions, such as the Ellora caves, the long history of vigorous, public debate of different views, the Ashoka edicts, and the religiously persecuted communities who found refuge in India all testify to this.

This twofold promise of secularism—equal citizenship and religious freedom for all—depends on the fulfillment of a condition, which is the most defining feature of secularism. The separation of the sphere of influence and operation of the state and religion. Separation of state and religion means that the state and religious bodies do not interfere in each other's affairs. There is neither interference of the state in religious matters, nor the influ-

ence of religion in the affairs of state. The prohibition of religious interference in matters of state is a corollary of and safeguard to equality before the law. It is evident that if there is to be equality, one group cannot be privileged over another by the state. This separation is what allows for, and at the same time, safeguards both freedom of religion and equal citizenship. It is the single condition that preserves the integrity of both. If this separation is not achieved, it will be impossible to avoid state interference in religion, inevitably violating the religious freedom of individuals and groups. And there will also inevitably be discrimination by the state against the individual's rights and privileges as a citizen. The result can only be a discordant, fragmented nation, or nations.

The Constitution goes a long way to ensure this required separation by the prohibition of religious instruction in state schools, and of taxes to support any particular religion. And, importantly, there is no provision for an official state religion. On the other hand, its mandate to ensure religious freedom breaks down in the constitutional sanction for state interference in religious affairs. This has resulted in state administration of temples and maths, state appropriation of temple lands and donations, even legislation of who should be admitted into the temples. More troubling is the unequal application of this sanction. In dealing with a minority religion, there are political constraints, which restrict the interference. But in legislating matters concerning the religion of the majority, there are no such constraints. As a result, the state has taken over places of worship and collection of revenue from offerings of the majority religion, but not others. Moreover, such revenue can be redistributed for other purposes, including maintenance of institutions of other religions, even those which are opposed to the majority religion. This has also led to the discriminatory modification of personal religious laws. The religious laws of some minority religions supersede parliamentary laws, while for the majority religion, parliamentary law has been enacted to supersede religious laws. This unequal treatment of religions by the state has created legitimate grounds for discord. And different civil or criminal laws for different groups, religious or otherwise, is the antithesis of secularism. If secularism is the aim, it is, therefore, necessary to find an alternative to the current relationship between the state and religion. And whether it is called secularism or something else, such change is necessary if there is to be unity, and at the same time, religious freedom in this country.

Non-interference of the state in religious affairs is sound, because it recognizes an important fact of human existence. Though the universal values, which form the basis for equality before the law, are connected to religion, there is another dimension of the religious life of a human being, so intimate, so sacred, that interference of any kind is experienced as violence. This is in one's understanding of and relationship to the Lord. It is here that pro-

tection is required. It is the responsibility of the state to ensure that no individual or group, including the state itself, interferes in religious expression. To do so is to violate sacred space, individual and collective, and sow the seeds for dissent and fragmentation. If national unity and harmony are to be secured, the jurisdiction of the state can only be in framing and enforcing criminal and civil laws. Conventions, religious or otherwise, are outside its scope, unless they transgress the criminal and civil laws. Because of this, framing the laws is a matter of great responsibility and complexity in a religiously and culturally diverse society.

In India, separation of religion and state has been unfortunately interpreted to mean equality of all religions in the eyes of the state. This has come to mean both that religious laws are binding on the state, and that the state has equal participation in all religions. While perhaps a benevolent ideal, we see that it has not been possible to uphold. It is important to understand that there can never be a perfectly secular state, because the core of a person, the place from which one lives one's life, knowingly or unknowingly, is his or her understanding of his/her relationship to the total. But in a religiously plural nation, secularism is the best option we have for preserving religious freedom and securing unity and harmony.

There are certain realities in any society which are unique. India is no exception. This is not an issue. The issue, for a governing body, is being in touch with those realities, all of them, and responding appropriately. This is sane. What is sanity but being in touch with reality? We are a religiously and culturally diverse nation and if we are to function as a homeland for every Indian citizen, and as a contributor in this global era, we must be sane. And to be sane, we must be united and fair. We cannot afford to marginalize or privilege any group, religious or otherwise.

If sanity is being in touch with reality, our religious traditions have something more to say about this. In all traditions, that reality is the Lord, and the ethical laws are intrinsic. Thus, the more ethical one is, the more one is in touch with the sacred reality, and, whether as an individual or a nation, the more sane one is—free of conflict, productive, in harmony with the universal order. This is our heritage, this is what India was, and can be again. Together we can claim this heritage. It is our duty to do so—our duty to our ancestors, to our neighbors, local and global, to our children and their children, and to our own integrity.

Om Tat Sat

Compiled by Swamini Agamananda. This is the seventh of nine articles based on Pujya Swamiji's talks on the said subject matter.